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Ecotheology: Liberation, Nature and Hope

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Our world is in a critical time for life on our home, the good Earth. The current global environmental crisis has driven people around the world to take our treatment of the living planet as a matter of deep repentance and change of lifestyle. But not enough people and societies live as if this were so. It is not too much to say that we need nothing less than a radical revolution in the way human people, cultures, and nations act toward "the earth, which is mother of us all" (Sirach 40:1, Good News Translation).

Within the circle of Christian faith, a crucial element of this revolution is the work of encouraging, reflecting upon and teaching this new way of life and thought through biblical preaching, prayers,

A newer element in Christian understanding of God and the world is "ecotheology," which as a sub-discipline of theology deals with the well-being of God's creation. It is a theology of liberation from sin, a theology of the interconnectedness of nature (including humanity), and a theology of hope as the power of God to transform lives and communities.

liturgies, and teaching.[1] All of these are the basic theological work of the church. And our communities need such guidance. The world needs to see and hear such an earth-friendly gospel among us. The term ecotheology is now used for this Christian way of thinking theologically about our living planet. This includes the human causes of the current crisis, and God's vocation upon all who live upon our common home. It includes a divine call to repent, change our ways, and live a new life of love for our neighbors in the community of creation.[2] The need for such a revolution could hardly be more pressing, as many in the environmental movement have been saying for decades.

Ecotheology is first and foremost a Christian theology, when it is done for the church. And the most fundamental form of theology is the preaching, prayers, worship, and hymns of the faithful, gathered as church around pulpit and table to worship the Blessed Trinity. This is the expression of church theology, for which academic theology is only a handmaiden. We can be thankful that, already, there are some wonderful sermons, prayers, sacramental liturgies, and spiritual songs promoting and celebrating earthkeeping.[3]

Here I will present ecotheology as a Christian theology; one that is a theology of liberation, a theology of nature, and a theology of hope.[4] The literature in this sub-discipline has grown considerably,

[1] For one among many books on greening the pulpit, see Leah D. Schade, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2015). There are many helpful online sites with earth-friendly liturgies, hymns, and prayers. Here are three examples: (a) from the Jesuits, https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/sustainability-prayers; (b) from the Episcopalians, https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/01/liturgies_honoring_god_in_creation_sclm.pdf; (c) and from Lutherans, https://lutheransrestoringcreation.org/.

[2] For an excellent, current overview of ecotheology see Ernst Conradie, "Ecotheology," *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology* (2023); Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017) among many fine overviews of the topic.

Historical note on terminology: the theological literature moved from "ecological theology" to "eco-theology" to simply "ecotheology." Cf. Kenneth P. Alpers, "Starting Points for an Ecological Theology: A Bibliographic Survey" *Dialog* 9, no. 2 (1970), 226–232; Thomas Seiger Derr, "Justice and Ecotheology at the National Council of Churches," *Worldview* 19, no. 10 (1975), 28–29. Derr's publication is the oldest I've found using the exact term "ecotheology".

[3] I take the term earthkeeping from Loren Wilkinson, *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980). See more recently, Steve Bouma-Prediger, *Creation Care Discipleship: Why Earthkeeping is an Essential Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

[4] Of course there are other kinds of ecotheology apart from Christian ones. But my focus here is on the religious thought I know best.

with important work being done in communities of faith as well as more academic settings. We can be grateful that this work is already ongoing around the world, while at the same time realizing that much more effort and substantial change is urgently needed toward liberating the earth and restoring creation.

Ecotheology and the Word of God

As a *Christian* theology, ecotheology is first and foremost a faithful response to the Word of God: gracious divine self-revelation through and to humans. The foundation of this self-revelation is of course the love, grace, and purposes of the Holy Trinity. Yet the primary public theological authority available now is found fundamentally in the Holy Bible, interpreted with Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical center and key to the whole. That the Bible is the primary source for our shared work of Christian theology, but not the only one, is important for ecotheology. For we also find God's grace at work in the creation itself, and know the world to be a place where the presence, power, and majesty of God can be experienced. As for sacred scripture, the work of biblical scholars, historians, theologians, and ethicists have found some common discoveries about the sources through which the Word of God speaks to us. The Bible, it turns out, is far more interested in bodies, land, animals, and plants than our common tradition has taught us. The Bible is, in fact, surprisingly eco-friendly![5] As for the long history of ecumenical spiritual insight and authoritative teaching, these are also central and important to be sure. But on the points of interest in ecotheology, this great tradition too often leads us to focus on the human, on the soul, and on heaven, understood as a dimension of spiritual reality far from our planet. Thus biblical interpretation, authoritative theological statements and teachings, and the shape of Christian worship, discipleship and ethics: all of these need to be revised in the light of our current environmental crisis. This task is daunting, to say the least, but also vital and exciting.

[5] For an early example of this work in biblical theology, see Eric Rust, *Nature – Garden or Desert?: An Essay in Environmental Theology* (Waco: Word Books, 1971); See more recently, among many works, Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).

What ecotheology brings to the standard, historic sources, goals, and norms of Christian theology is an insistence that the living world of our planet is *crucially* an area where God is at work, and where humans can experience the God of grace, love, and revelation. While creation does not replace the holy scriptures as the primary source of our knowledge of God, it does make creation and knowledge of nature *important*. While the world is not created in the image of God, living things have their own sacred character as creatures of God, and places where God is present and at work for life, community and blessedness. God is not only concerned with human life. True, the created world has long been seen as a source of knowledge of the divine. Indeed, we can find such a view in the Bible itself.[6] What is new in the last one hundred years or so of ecotheology is the central, essential place that knowledge of the world, and love for all creation, plays in the goals and methods of theology and ethics. Such a focus involves a sustained recognition of the grace, power, providence, and promise of God throughout the cosmos, beyond the laser-focus on the soul, heaven, and humanity we find in the great theological tradition.

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In the "secular" theologies of the mid-twentieth century, the worldliness of "the world" was pressed upon the Church. Now we must see the world is the *living planet earth* which is sacred, a domain of the love and work of God, and leave behind the false binary that creates a vast chasm between heaven and earth, or secular and sacred. Ecotheology should therefore not be a so-called secular theology. But it does focus our creativity, energy, and hope upon the created world

[6] See, e.g., Psalm 19:1–5, Prov. 3:19, Job 28:23–28 and 40:6–41:24 or Rom. 1:18–23). James Barr explores the biblical foundations of "natural theology" (as he defines it on page 1) in his *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

(*saeculum*) as a sphere of God's grace, power, presence, and purpose. After all, we have one living planet that is our home, one place where we all belong together as earthlings and fellow creatures. It is to this living world that Jesus came among us as a creature, that we might follow God's ways among ourselves, to be sure. Yet importantly we need to stress today that Christ calls us to live a life of discipleship for the love of *the whole community of creation*. So, while ecotheology is certainly not the whole of theology, I believe that the whole of theological studies and writing needs to incorporate, engage, and learn from ecotheology.

Theology of Liberation

Christian ecotheology is a form and sub-discipline Christian doctrine as such. But there is another key aspect of ecotheology: it is deeply connected to a revolutionary praxis. Our living planet is in peril, pressed on all sides by unprecedented dangers. Human action and inaction, to no small degree, are a major cause of this eco-crisis. Action is needed, but so is clear thinking. Ecotheology has much in common with a theology of *liberation*. Indeed, ecotheology is a *liberative theology*: it seeks to overcome oppression and evil in the name of God. But unlike Latin American liberation theology, black theology, queer theology, or other liberative approaches, ecotheology is concerned with the oppression, instrumentalizing, destruction, and gross injustices we humans are doing to all the other life on earth. It thus moves beyond human-centered liberative theologies to embrace a truly global perspective.

It's true: humans tend to think about things in terms of their own species. Concern for liberation, and naming the realities of oppression and injustice, are certainly of critical importance within human history and society. Yet for our purposes, let's distinguish between the *inter-human* and the *extra-human* when speaking of oppression and liberation. The view I promote is somewhat dialectical, requiring the holding of two points in a creative tension. On the one hand, ecotheology is essentially concerned about the reality of extra-human oppression, destruction, pollution, and death-dealing. This is because ecotheology seeks to develop a kind of *critical theory* of a Christian liberative praxis for the living earth. Naturally, the major focus of

such a critical theory will be on environmental issues. At the same time, any critical theory finds its home in the community's liberating revolutionary *praxis*. The notion of a praxis is of a pattern of action-reflection, where crucial acts of revolutionary resistance and counter-cultural community are improved and criticized by theory, and theory is illumined and developed out real-world results from such practices and community.[7] So for ecotheology the focus will be on *extra-human* oppression and liberation, that is to say, the liberation of all our fellow creatures from the oppression and death-dealing of *homo sapiens*.

On the other hand, in practice we know there are many ways in which the destruction of the bases of life on our planet are coordinated, concentrated, and abetted by structural evils within humankind, that is to say, *intra-human* oppression. Both of these central points about theory and practice are accurate and wise, each correcting a harmful extreme that comes from focusing on just one. Poverty, warmongering, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia: all of these are the dark side of the same social institutions, vices, prejudices and evils that lie behind extra-human oppression. Inter- and extra-human vice, sin, and evil are complex and interconnected in many ways in history and modern society. Resistance to one alone will not be fully effective. Yet as a critical theory, ecotheology is called to focus on one dimension—the world as a whole living planet—in order to contribute to such a larger, holistic, and multi-dimensional praxis.

The plain fact is that efforts to resist and end each *specific* form of injustice requires a careful knowledge of what is actually going on, both in the nature of this particular evil and the worldview and propaganda that supports it. So, while intersectional synthesis is often illuminating, it always depends upon a more focused understanding of specific forms and ideologies of oppression and injustice, in order to deepen our understanding and guide our needed revolution. While no sound thinking wants to wholly separate the many dimensions of structural and personal evil in our world, powerful and wise efforts of resistance and revolution require a deep focus on each specific one. At the same time, the practice of resisting and overcoming such evils necessarily requires working on many fronts together. An illustration of this dialectical approach of both/and can be found in Pope Francis's

[7] Since such a revolution here is a lead by Jesus our Messiah, his teachings and his ministry, it will of course be a non-violent resistance not a violent revolution.

excellent encyclical, *Laudato Si' (*2015). The Vatican consulted expert advisers in science, ethics, theology, and earthkeeping praxis from around the world, which then went into this famous and influential encyclical.[8] This allowed for a knowledgeable and holistic theological and ethical statement, advocating for an "integral ecology" that seeks justice in terms of both human rights and the rights of the natural world.

Ecotheology, Ecojustice and Natural Rights

In various ways and with many voices, ecotheology has taken its place in the cry for justice: for humans, to be sure, but *centrally* for ecotheology, for the earth itself. The ground for such a moral imperative is often put in terms of *rights*: human rights for humans combined with the right to live and to flourish for the whole community of creation. The resulting notion is that of ecojustice, an insistence the earth itself should have justice, where the rights of all living things are granted and protected. [9] How can things like trees, rocks, water, and animals have rights? This has been a controversial point. In answer, let's consider the view of human rights from Simone Weil. She argued near the end of WWII, when thinking about the good society, that human rights can be parsed ethically in terms of *obligations*.[10] The right to freedom of speech can thus be understood as an obligation upon the government and other citizens not to censor or stifle free speech and its propagation (and not all speech has such a right). In terms of ecojustice, the right to live and flourish enjoyed by all living things could be understood as both an obligation on people to *cease destroying the living vibrant systems that support all life on earth* alongside a positive obligation to *support* the flourishing of life on earth. This would mean, minimally, that we heal and care for those

[8] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care For Our Common Home,* (2015). https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

[9] For a nuanced argument for the connection between justice and basic rights, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, Justice: *Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[10] Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2–3. As Wolterstorff puts this point, "Rights are normative bonds between oneself and the other," 5.

places we are so actively destroying as a species—but even this difficult goal would just be a beginning.

Do living but things have rights, or do only persons have them? It is at this point that monotheism becomes one way of answering the question: says who? Who can give a moral obligation to the entire human species on behalf all other living things? The God of Abraham is one powerful and rational answer this question for believers, and not just for Christians. We share much in common with our siblings in the Abrahamic faiths, and this is one such point. For any ethical monotheist, it is God the Creator—perfectly righteous, just, and the ground of moral goodness—who has the authority to give commands to humans on behalf of all life on earth. Other worldviews will have their own reasoning, of course, but for this theologian the moral nature and teachings of God, and our natural obligation to obey the Holy One, is the ultimate source of rights for the community of creation.

For ecotheology the quest for a just and peaceful community includes the natural world, of which humans are just a part. Rights for animals, plants, and the environment as a whole should make good sense to believers in God. But focusing theologically upon the world of nature, by insisting we need to deeply understanding our world, ecotheology is also a *theology of nature*.

Theology of Nature

Just what is a theology of nature? This discipline within theology is a development away from a more pluralistic and philosophical "natural theology" popular in the nineteenth century, toward a robustly Christian theology of the natural world grounded in divine self-revelation. Karl Barth, in particular, is famous for his rejection of natural theology, understood as a theological discipline that sought to develop Christian doctrine independent on such special revelation from the Holy Trinity, and based instead upon human reason alone, and our knowledge of the natural world. In other words, "natural theology" was, for Barth, a way of doing Christian theology apart from the special self-revelation of God in Scripture, Israel, and Jesus Christ. While I agree with Barth in his own terms, that Christian theology puts Jesus Christ at the heart of our knowledge of God, I find nothing to object to a natural theology as a discipline of the mind which

understands itself to be *philosophy of religion*, rather than any kind of Christian theology.[11]

My call for a "theology of nature" points to a fully Christian theology, with all the attachment to Christ, scripture, and the Word of God this implies.[12] At the same time, it aims to interpret the natural world in theological terms, and engage the findings of the natural sciences as a foundation for that theological work. Of course, the great teachers of the Church have been doing this for millennia, with Basil of Caesarea's famous *Hexameron* being an early, influential example.[13] But the theology of nature in our time refers to an approach that engages our modern scientific and experiential knowledge of the natural world. For theology seeks the truth about God, and about all things in their relationship to God. In practice a theology of nature draws upon a creative and mutually informative dialog with the natural sciences in developing a theological interpretation of nature and our scientific knowledge of nature, as part of a robustly Christian doctrine of creation.[14]

A Theology of Hope

Knowledge and theory are of central importance is any successful praxis seeking to make the world a better place. But we also need some hope for the hard work of such a liberative praxis. The late Jürgen Moltmann was the greatest theologian of hope and eschatology in our time, and we are still continuing to learn from his witness. His 1984

[11] Alan G. Padgett, "*Theologia Naturalis*: Philosophy of Religion or Doctrine of Creation?," *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004): 493–502.

[12] G. S. Hendry, *Theology of Nature* (New York: Westminster Press, 1980). The definition of "natural theology" is contested in theological circles. See Alister McGrath, "Natural Theology," *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology* (2022), §2. In philosophy of religion, it has a more settled and traditional meaning, which I follow here. I find the difference between a theology of nature and a natural theology important, in terms of the real differences between Christian theology and philosophy. See also Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 1–20; David Fergusson, *Creation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 63–74. Further exploration of this point would take us beyond our current purpose.

[13] This was a theological commentary in sermonic form, on the six days of creation in Genesis. See the translation in *Saint Basil: Exegetical Homilies*, ed. trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way C.D.P. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 3–150.

[14] One developed proposal for a theology of nature [in my terms, not his] is Alister McGrath's *A Scientific Theology: Nature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001). See more recently McGrath, "Natural Theology," *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology* (2022).

Gifford lectures, published as *God in Creation*, has the original German subtitle of "An Ecological Doctrine of Creation."[15] In this book Moltmann applied the basic structures and approach of his famous theology of hope to our current ecological crisis and need for conceptual reformation. On the one hand, *he is relentlessly realistic* about the evils in our world, not least the social, political, and economic evils, those "demonic" forces that deal in oppression, violence, and death. On the other, *he consistently called for a spirit of hope and resistance*, based not merely on human efforts but on the living Christ whom the Spirit empowers us to trust, love, and follow in this world. For Jesus is truly alive and at work among both the faithful and all people of good will. The presence, grace and power of the Holy Trinity can and will sustain us, when we trust in the promise of the gospel and the creational providence of God. For God promises that sin, destruction, death and the demonic will not have the final victory. Victory belongs to the Lamb who was slain. And so hope is neither empty nor naïve, but grounded in the God of all reality. As for theology, Moltmann called for a "messianic doctrine of creation" that:

> sees creation together with its future—a future for which it was made and in with it will be perfected. Ever since ancient times the "future of creation" has been termed the "kingdom of glory." Human beings already experience the indwellings of God in the Spirit here in history, even if as yet only partially and provisionally. That is why they hope that in the kingdom of glory God will dwell entirely and completely and forever in his creation. [16]

Our hope for creation in this age thus has a past grounding and a future promise in the work of God. It is grounded in the creative power of God, which continues to sustain and renew the world. It is grounded in the incarnation and bodily resurrection of the God-creature, Jesus Christ. And it is grounded in the present, dynamic work of the living Christ in the Church and the world today. We hope also in the promise of God for the future, to dwell forever with us in full communion with creation in a renewed earth.

[15] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). The German sub-title is *Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*.

[16] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 5.

We need such a realistic hope in this struggle against environmental exploitation and destruction. The enemy of a revolution is not merely the forces we wrestle against: it is also the hopeless apathy that can infect our own spirit. I confess that for days, weeks, even months I have felt this sense of hopelessness, frustration, and anger. Thanks be to God, my friends in the family of faith have held faith for me, even when I could not. Their faith, hope, and love surrounded me, and helped me turn again in faith to our Creator, in whom we can indeed renew our strength.

Christian ecotheology today is theology of liberation, a theology of nature, and also a theology of hope. It takes reasoning and science seriously about our environment crisis, but it also finds a crucial place in an essential revolutionary praxis.

I have been arguing that a Christian ecotheology today is theology of liberation, a theology of nature, and also a theology of hope. It takes reasoning and science seriously about our environment crisis, but it also finds a crucial place in an essential revolutionary praxis. A green revolution is not just a cute phrase: our hurting world really does need a literal revolution and a powerful repentance of the way human individuals, societies, economies, and nations handle our one and only home in the cosmos. It is an urgent matter of global concern that Christians, along with all people, repent and radically change. Earlier I mentioned that the most fundamental home of theology is in the faith-community in worship of God and mission to the world. Ecotheology takes its most basic home as one aspect of the Body of Christ in the world, one part of a spiritual ecology in the community of faith, when we embody the message of an earth-friendly gospel of Shalom through hymns, songs, prayers, worship, liturgy, testimony, and liberative practice. Talking and thinking is certainly not enough: the world needs our sacrificial action, and that of all people. But action just trends water or runs in circles apart from a guiding vision, wisdom, knowledge, and values. It is this dynamic combination of both labor and prayer, both contemplation and action, that the world needs

most from us. Thanks be to God, our Savior and Creator, who calls and empowers us into this new life. ⊕

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